

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

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EO 11652: NA

TAGS: PFOR VE PN

SUBJ: MEETING BETWEEN VENEZUELAN AND PANAMANIAN HEADS OF STATE

BEGIN SUMMARY: GENERAL TORRIJOS FLEW TO VENEZUELA ON OCT 29 FOR A FOUR-HOUR PRIVATE MEETING WITH PRESIDENT PEREZ. THEY REPORTEDLY DISCUSSED THE LATIN AMERICAN HEADS OF STATE MEETING IN PANAMA NEXT YEAR AND THE PANAMA CANAL NEGOTIATIONS, WHICH PEREZ CHARACTERIZED AS "THE MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEM BETWEEN LATIN AMERICA AND THE U.S." END SUMMARY

1. TRAVELING ON BOARD HIS OWN PLANE, PANAMA'S HEAD OF STATE, GEN. OMAR TORRIJOS, MADE AN APPARENTLY UNEXPECTED VISIT TO VENEZUELA ON THE AFTERNOON OF OCT 29 AND RETURNED TO PANAMA THE SAME DAY. PRESIDENT PEREZ GREETED TORRIJOS AT THE AIRPORT AND TOOK HIM TO THE PRESIDENT'S COASTAL RESIDENCE, LA GUZMANIA, FOR A FOUR-HOUR DISCUSSION. TORRIJOS WAS ACCOMPANIED BY EDUCATION MINISTER ARISTIDES ROYO, PANAMA UNIVERSITY RECTOR ROMULO ESCOBAR AND NATIONAL GUARD G-2 CHIEF LT. COL. MANUEL ANTONIO NORIEGA. VNEZUELAN INTERIOR MINISTER OCTAVIO LEPAGE, FOREIGN MINISTER RAMON ESCOBAR SALOM AND EDUCATION MINISTER LUIS MANUEL PENALVER ALSO JOINED THE MEETING WITH TORRIJOS.

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2. UPON HIS ARRIVAL FROM PANAMA, TORRIJOS TOLD THE PRESS THAT HE

AND PEREZ WOULD DISCUSS MATTERS OF GREAT SIGNIFICANCE FOR PANAMA, PARTICULARLY WITH RESPECT TO THE CANAL. FOLLOWING HIS MEETING WITH TORRIJOS, PEREZ REMARKED TO JOURNALISTS THAT HE AND TORRIJOS HAD DISCUSSED ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE LATIN AMERICAN HEADS OF STATE MEETING IN PANAMA NEXT YEAR. ACCORDING TO THE PRESS, PEREZ ADDED THAT "WE ARE ALSO, OF COURSE, MUCH CONCERNED TO KNOW HOW CONVERSATIONS

ARE PROCEEDING (ON A CANAL TREATY), SINCE THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEM IN RELATIONS BETWEEN LATIN AMERICA AND THE U.S." INTERIOR MINISTER LEPAGE TOLD THE PRESS THAT THE PANAMA SUMMIT MEETING WAS THE PRINCIPAL REASON FOR TORRJKIOS' VISIT.

3. COMMENT: BOTH PEREZ AND HIS MINISTERS PARTICIPATING IN THE MEETING ATTEMPTED TO HIDE FROM THE PRESS THE REASON FOR THEIR SUDDEN DEPARTURE FROM CARACAS. THEIR ILL-CONCEALED MOVES ADDED TO THE DRAMA OF THIS EVENT, WHICH THE VENEZUELAN NEWSPAPERS HEADLINED AS A "SECRET" OR "SURPRISE" MEETING BETWEEN PEREZ AND TORRJKIOS. PART OF THE PROBLEM SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN THAT THE TORRIJOS VISIT WAS INDEED A "SURPRISE" TO AT LEAST MOST OF THOSE INVOLVED. PRESIDENT PEREZ MUST HAVE KNOWN TORRIJOS WAS COMING BUT APPARENTLY FAILED TO LET A NUMBER OF HIS COLLEAGUES IN ON IT UNTIL ALMOST TIME TO TAKE THE HELICOPTER. IN ANY CASE, LEPAGE'S ASSERTION THAT ARRANGEMENTS FOR NEXT YEAR'S SUMMIT MEETING WERE THE PRINCIPAL REASON FOR THE VISIT LACKS CREDIBILITY. PANAMA'S ACTING FOREIGN MINISTER WAS HERE ONLY RECENTLY FOR THAT PURPOSE (CARACAS 10878). THERE CAN BE LITTLE DOUBT THAT THE CANAL NEGOTIATIONS OCCUPIED CENTER STAGE.
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